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ABSTRACT

A study of the development of children's production of two kinds of narratives, script and episodic, had as subjects 60 children aged 3, 5, and 7, with 20 children in each age group. In the experiment, 10 children in each group were asked to produce script narratives ("What happens when you do X?") for 3 events and the other 10 were asked to produce episodic narratives ("What happened one time when you did X?") for 3 events. The initial script and episodic questions were followed by nondirective probe questions. The narratives were analyzed for the number, type (act, elaboration, conditional, or description), and verb tense of propositions and the qualifiers used. A number of differences between the narrative types appeared in the data. Children predominantly used the timeless present tense in script and past tense in episodic narratives, reported more acts and fewer conditionals in script than episodic narratives, and used conditionals primarily to refer to specific moments in time. The two narrative types were distinguished also by the proportion of general and specific information produced, as a function of subject familiarity with the event in question. Children at all ages could produce coherent narratives of each type but both types became more complex with subject age. Five categories of episodic narratives were identified: single act, act list, act sequence, incident, and thematic. Script narratives were found to be more similar than episodic across age groups. (MSE)

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# Differentiation and development in children's event narratives

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This study compared children's production of script and episodic event narratives. A script is a general account of what usually happens in an event whereas an episodic narrative is a description of a specific past episode. In both types of narratives, the child is asked to describe or give an account of an event. However, each type of event narrative requires the child to present different kinds of information about events in a particular form. By comparing children's scripts and episodic narratives at different ages, we were interested in how children differentiate script and episodic event narratives and how each narrative form develops with age.

First consider the properties of script narratives. They are accounts of what is likely to happen or what should happen in a given event. This most salient information is presented sequentially as in "first you do X, then you do Y". Options and alternatives can be included as "sometimes you do Z" or "you can do X or Y" and "if X happens, then you do Y". Episodic information is only appropriate as an example of what might occur. The structure of the narrative, that is, what governs the selection and sequencing of information, is determined by the prototypic sequence for all such events in the real world. The appropriate point of view is one of an impersonal narrator who does not intrude him or herself into the account.

Episodic narratives are also event descriptions but are accounts of a single past episode. We have identified two categories of episodic narratives in our data. The first type follows closely the structure of the event in the real world. Simliar to script narratives, a temporally accurate sequence of activities is given in the form "first we did X, then we did Y". Episodic narratives of this type are distinguished from script narratives in their use of the past tense and designation of specific participants. A second type of episodic narrative imposes a plot on the narrative. The selection and sequencing of information is related not only by temporal contiguity but by the use of narrative devices, for example, "we were doing X and all of a sudden, Y happened. So we did Z."

In both types of episodic narratives, event-based and plotted, there is an implicit demand to mention particular details of the experience that distinguish a single occurrence from all other occurrences. The perspective of the narrator is one of a participant. General information that might be included in a script narrative is often presupposed in the episodic narratives and is only provided as background to explain or highlight particular activities.

Our characterization of scripts as narratives is somewhat unusual in that narratives are typically considered descriptions of specific past experiences. Nonetheless, to the degree that scripts relate personally experienced events and provide accounts of the temporal

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order of events as well as who and what is involved, these accounts can be considered narratives (Deese, 1983). However, they differ from episodic accounts and stories which have an evaluative component. We feel that in studying narrative development, a useful approach is to examine the variety of types of narratives children produce in order to reveal patterns of development that are common to all narratives as well as stylistic developments that are unique to specific narrative genres. We are not trying to obscure important differences between various narrative genres but are simply acknowledging that there is more than one way to tell a story or describe an event.

The data are drawn from 60 children, 20 at each of three ages--age 3, age 5, and age 7. Ten children in each age group were asked to produce script narratives for 3 events. The script question was formulated as "What happens when you do X?" (e.g., when you go to the zoo or when you go to the beach). The remaining 10 children in each age group were asked to give episodic narratives for 3 events and the episodic question was formulated as "What happened one time when you did X? (e.g. when you went to the zoo, when you went to Disneyland). The initial script and episodic questions were followed by nondirective probes such as "Anything else?" and "What else?". Children were then asked "What is the first thing that happens?" (or the first thing that happened) and "Then what happens?" (or happened). Children were interviewed individually and all interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

In analyzing children's event narratives, it is important to take into account children's experience with events because familiarity with events necessarily influences the amount of general and episodic information children have available to report. Therefore, the 3 events children narrated included a one-time experience, an event that had been experienced a few times (2-5 times) and an event that had been experienced many times (more than 5). Familiarity was determined from a questionnaire accompanying the consent form in which parents indicated how many times their child had participated in enjoyable activities such as going to the circus, beach, zoo, birthday parties, and amusement parks.

Each narrative was first coded for the number of propositions reported. Next, the tense used in each proposition was coded. Then each proposition was coded in terms of 4 categories of informational content. Acts are defined as any action reported in a narrative ("I see all kinds of animals." "I saw Mickey Mouse in a parade.") Elaborations are repetitions of previously mentioned acts with the addition of more specific information, changes in actors or objects, or specification of an alternative action ("We went to the circus....Anne and me went to the circus"). Two types of conditionals were scored: temporal conditionals refer to acts which follow or co-occur ("When we first got on the plane...") and enabeling conditionals specify conditions to be met for an act to occur ("If you went on that ride..."). Descriptions of physical characteristics and affective states were also scored ("And the cake looked like a train." "I like when there's a bumpy landing.") Finally, each proposition was coded for the presence of optional or particular qualifiers. Optional

qualifiers such as "sometimes", "usually", and "or" indicate optional or alternative acts in a script. Particular qualifiers refer to specific people, times, and locations. Adjectives, adverbs, adjective clauses, and adverbial clauses were also considered particular qualifiers.

Analyses of variance with age, question, and amount of experience as factors were performed on the number of propositions reported and the proportions of tense use, proposition types and qualifiers (all reported effects, $p < .05$). Proportion scores were used in the analyses to control for the fact that older children consistently reported more information that younger children.

Although the number of propositions children reported increased with age (means of 6.03, 12.45, and 14.43 for 3-, 5-, and 7-year-olds, respectively), type of question and degree of familiarity had no effect on the amount of information included in children's narratives. These factors did, however, influence the content of children's narratives as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Mean percentages of tense use, proposition types and qualifers

| | | Question | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Script | | | | Episodic | | | |
| Number of experiences | | One | Few | Many | $\bar{X}$ | One | Few | Many | $\bar{X}$ |
| Tense: | Present | 56 | 73 | 78 | 69 | 09 | 12 | 19 | 13 |
| | Past | 40 | 21 | 15 | 26 | 90 | 84 | 80 | 84 |
| Proposition | Acts | 47 | 49 | 61 | 52 | 38 | 44 | 49 | 44 |
| types: | Elaborations | 18 | 23 | 19 | 20 | 19 | 24 | 21 | 21 |
| | Conditionals | 30 | 21 | 10 | 7 | 35 | 27 | 23 | 28 |
| | Descriptions | 5 | 7 | 10 | 7 | 7 | 4 | 7 | 6 |
| Qualifiers: | Optional | 3 | 9 | 9 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Particular | 29 | 18 | 17 | 21 | 37 | 36 | 31 | 34 |

First consider the overall differences between the two types of narratives. Children predominantly used the timeless present tense in script narratives while past tense was used in reporting episodic narratives. Children also reported a higher percentage of acts and a lower percentage of conditionals in script narratives than in episodic narratives. The majority of conditional propositions children reported referred to specific moments in time (e.g. "when the circus ended"),

indicating a more temporally contingent type of reporting. Although the percentage of descriptions was consistently low across both types of narrative, children did provide more particular details in the episodic narratives than in the script narratives. Further, children mentioned optional information only in the script narratives.

Familiarity with events influenced both types of narratives. After a single experience, both scripts and episodic narratives had more episodic characteristics, but with increasing experience, they included more general and less particular information. Use of the present tense increased while use of the past tense decreased; the percentage of acts mentioned increased while the percentage of specific conditionals decreased; and the percentage of particular qualifiers decreased while mention of optional information in the script narratives increased.

That is, script and episodic narratives were distinguished by the proportion of general and specific information included and this proportion varied as a function of familiarity with the event in question. These findings indicate that the use of particular narrative forms in children's production of event narratives is a function of children's knowledge base and memory system.

How did children incorporate both general and specific information into script and episodic narratives? Here, the distinction between background and foreground information is useful. According to Hopper (1980), information relating to the progression of the event sequence being described is foreground information while timeless, unsequenced information that comments on the event is background information. Notice, however, that general and specific information play different roles as background and foreground information in script and episodic narratives. In giving a script, general information is the foreground. Specific information is only appropriate as an example of what sometimes happens and in this way is used as background information. In giving a script narrative of a birthday party, one child provided the following description of an exception to the typical birthday party event:

> "And then in one birthday party, we went to the Statue of Liberty. 'Cept that one we didn't have cake." (Age 7,9)

In an episodic narrative, specific information is the foreground and general information is the background. This is shown in the following example where the child first indicates what usually happens, then indicates the particular game played when giving an episodic narrative of a birthday party:

> "You play games....We played pin the tail on the donkey." (Age 5,9)

With age, children reported more propositions and higher proportions of descriptions and optional and particular qualifiers in both types of narratives. However, children at all ages produced appropriately differentiated script and episodic narratives, indicating that these forms are well within the capabilities of even preschool children. Thus, children at all ages were able to produce coherent script and episodic narratives but both types became more complex with age.

The last analysis relates to the overall structure of children's narratives. For this analysis, we examined what children reported when asked "What happens...?" or "What happened...?" and their responses to nondirective probes before they were asked "What is the first thing that happens?" (or the first thing that happened).

We identified 3 categories of script narratives in our data. In the single act narrative the child mentions only one act, usually the most salient:

> "We eat cake. (You eat cake. What else?) Nothing else." (Age 3,7, Birthday party)

In an act list the child lists a series of acts: In some narratives listing reflects the real world event sequence but there is no explicit sequencing of these acts on the part of the child:

> "I get presents. I get birthday cake and I eat it all up." (Age 3,7; Birthday party)

In other act list narratives, the child first mentioned a highly salient act, then lists additional acts in response to probes:

> "Roller skate. (What else?) Hear music. And go with your parents. (Go with your parents. Anything else?) Some lights. You have to order, you have to get your roller skates or else bring it from home. And I don't know what else." (Age 5,1; Roller skating)

In an act sequence the actions are sequenced explicitly:

> "I first go to the water. (What else?) Then I go home. Then I put, then I put stones into the bag and take it home." (Age 3,8; Beach)

The percentage of children at each age producing each type of script narrative is shown in Table 2. The first column refers to the percentage of children who actually gave episodic narratives instead of scripts. These tended to occur when younger children were asked to give a script narrative of a single experience. Children at all ages produced each type of script narrative. In general, 3- and 5-year-olds produced the same types of script narratives while 7-year-olds were less likely to mention only one act and more likely to sequence their narratives explicitly.

Table 2

Percentages of children producing each type of script narrative

| | Episode | Single Act | Act List | Act Sequence |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Age 3 | 27 | 30 | 33 | 10 |
| Age 5 | 27 | 27 | 33 | 13 |
| Age 7 | 10 | 7 | 52 | 31 |

Five categories of episodic narratives were identified. Single act, act list and act sequence narratives were structurally similar to script narratives and were considered event-based narratives:

Single act:

"I falled down. (What else happened?) Nothing else." (Age 3,3; Ice skating)

Act list:

"Well,...when I went to Bermuda,...I don't think we went to the beach. But we stayed in a hotel. And I got to swim in a pool. It was so much fun. (What else?) Um, my mother, she took some movie camera pictures of me behind the flowers right in front of our hotel. And we went on, I forgot what kind of ride. I don't remember. But there were really nice stores. And we went to buy some things." (Age 6,11; Vacation)

Act sequence:

"I went to the haunted house and, um, I saw Dracula. And then, um, I went out because it was nine o'clock. So we went home. We went on the bus. We went home and then we went to bed." (Age 5,9; Amusement park)

Two categories of plotted narratives were also identified. In the incident narrative, children tended to deviate from the event structure and commented on a particular segment of the episode. Although the overall structure may be characterized as a list or a sequence, by elaborating a particular portion of the episode, the narrative was dominated by these mini-themes or incidents. In the following account of a birthday party, the child used the progressive to set up situations and relate propositions:

"Once I went to Peter's birthday party. And there was lots of children there. Lisa was there. And, and that's when I, my daddy was in the house staying with Rebecca. Rebecca's my sister. (Well, what happened when you went to Peter's party?) Uh, I was (unintelligible) when, Rebecca was drinking her bottle there. (What else?) And they had a hamburger there. A frankfurter. That's what I had there. (What else?) Then I didn't want and more frankfurter. And my, and I put it on my plate.And the birthday cake. We were waiting and then the birthday cake comed." (Age 3,8)

Incident narratives may be precursors to thematic narratives which draw their structure from a plot that was developed. Thematic narratives were also distinguished by increased backgrounding and use of the progressive but the difference between a theme and an incident is that a theme introduces a plot from the very beginning that is developed throughout the entire narrative, often leading up to a final statement that sums up the narrative. In the following account of a what happened at the circus, the child uses such devices as "all of a sudden", "so", and "but" to relate the propositions:

"One time when I went to the circus, I spilled (unintelligible) and popcorn. Then I asked my Grandpa to take, to buy me a hotdog there. But all of a sudden, started like this Star Wars space ship action. So I called him to see it. But he was waiting at the store, the hotdog store. Then I saw it." (Age 5,7)

In the next example, the child selected information from two separate

ice skating episodes that are related to a theme of failure and success:

> "I, I kept tripping and tripping. And then the next day, we came to Central Park to ice skate, and um, I was going so fast that I beat everybody in skating." (Age 5,9)

In the following example, the child narrates stories about separate visits to the beach, each having different plots:

> "Once I remember that I had one dollar and I was going with my uncle to the place so I could buy something to drink. And I was sitting down for a minute since it was so far away, down at the other end of the beach. So I sat down for a minute and, um, I saw something on the ground. And I picked it up and it was a nickel. And he found a penny. (Anything else?) I can, well, once I went clamming. (Well, tell me about what happened one time you went clamming at the beach.) And um, all my daddy could catch was a bunch of little clams. But I caught three big ones. (Then what happened?) Well, I had five little clams, and my grandma and grandpa had the two big clams, and Mommy and Daddy had the rest of the little clams. (Age 6,8)

These last three examples illustrate how the real world event sequence of actions is embedded into a plot that relates a subset of all that actully happened to what was significant to the aspects of the experience that the narrator has chosen to develop. The percentage of children at each age group who produced each type of episodic narrative are shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Percentages of children producing each type of episodic narrative.

| | Script | Single Act | Act List | Act Sequence | Incident | Thematic |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Age 3 | 10 | 20 | 37 | 17 | 17 | 0 |
| Age 5 | 3 | 17 | 17 | 10 | 28 | 24 |
| Age 7 | 0 | 3 | 33 | 0 | 13 | 50 |

The types of episodic narratives that children produced varied more by age than did their script narratives. As found in the script narratives, an incorrect type of narrative (in this case, reporting a script instead of an episode) decreased with age along with single act narratives. However, there was more variability in children's production of multiact narratives. About half of 3-year-olds' extended narratives were act lists and the remaining half were split equally between act sequences and incidents. None of the 3-year-olds produced fully plotted narratives. In contrast, more than half of the 5-year-olds' extended narratives were either incidents or themes with act lists accounting for a lower proportion of narratives than for 3-year-olds. The oldest children produced more act lists than the 5-year-olds but this could be a reflection of the fact that they

tended to provide more information in general and therefore produced more act list narratives instead of single acts. Similarly the fact that they produced no act sequences indicates that when they gave sequenced narratives, these were either incidents or themes; half of all the 7-year-olds' episodic narratives could be considered thematic narratives as compared to 25% for 5-year-olds and none for 3-year-olds.

One explanation for the fact that script narratives are more similar across age than episodic narratives is that script narratives are based on children's general knowledge about what happens in familiar events organized conceptually in terms of generalized event representations (Nelson & Gruendel, 1981). This type of mental representation is available to children at an early age to structure event narratives. Generalized event representations may provide a basic conceptual structure for generating many types of event narratives including scripts, plans, episodes, and stories. Of course each of these genres have unique characteristics and children must also master the complexities of different narrative forms. A precursor to all of these may be the ability to mentally represent real world event sequences. Children's script narratives may then reflect their early mastery of a basic proto-narrative form.

In contrast, the development of episodic narratives is characterized by a development away from relying soley on real world event sequences to organize narratives and an increasing ability to comment on the event and plot a narrative with respect to a theme or a particular point of veiw. Although fully plotted narratives were only produced by 5- and 7-year-olds, precursors were evident in 3-year-olds' incident narratives. This finding indicates a development form what White (1980) refers to as narrating an event to narrativizing, that is, telling a story or relating an event for a particular purpose. The ability to narrativize may depend on the ability to appreciate the components of plot structures and may be dependent on exposure to narratives (in the form of stories or in discourse) as well as a more complex conceptual system that can represent personal experience in terms of plots, motives, and interacting participant structures.

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